

STUDIES IN HEBREWS No. 13

Hebrews 7:1-17

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Though the exposition has been interrupted with some lengthy sections of application, we are now in a section of this sermon devoted to demonstrating that Jesus Christ is superior to Aaron and to the Levitical priests who descended from him. The preacher has already demonstrated, you remember, that Jesus is superior to the prophets, to the angels, and to Moses. Now comes Aaron and the priests. That section began at 4:14. In the course of his comparison of Christ's priestly work with that of the priests of Israel, to demonstrate that Jesus was an authentic priest, we have already heard, in 5:6, that Jesus Christ was declared by God to be a priest in the order of Melchizedek. But nothing was said there in explanation of that fact. At the end of chapter 6 that fact was restated in summing up the work of Christ as our Savior. Now the author is going to expand on this point.

- v.2 This incident is recorded for us in Genesis 14:18-20. Abraham was returning from his triumph in battle against the confederation of four kings that had invaded the Promised Land, defeated a confederation of five Canaanite kings, and carried off, among others, Abraham's nephew Lot as captive. Melchizedek, the king of Salem, that is the town that would later be known as Jerusalem, came out to meet Abraham, set a banquet for him, and blessed him. Abraham, in turn, gave Melchizedek a tenth of all the plunder he had taken from the kings he had defeated.

Melchi-zedek means "king of righteousness" (*melki*, a form of *melek* means "king" and *zedek* means righteousness). *Salem* is a form of *shalom* meaning "peace." These, of course, are fit names for Jesus: King of peace and righteousness.

- v.3 In the few verses in Genesis 14 nothing is said of Melchizedek's lineage, either his birth and ancestry or his death and posterity. The statement based on that fact here in Hebrews 7:3 – "without beginning of days or end of life" – has led to a long debate as to whether we are being taught that Melchizedek was, in fact, a supernatural figure, perhaps even a pre-incarnate appearance of the Son of God. In other words, "without beginning of days or end of life" should be taken literally as meaning that the Melchizedek Abraham knew was, in fact, not a mortal human being but an immortal figure. Some have even suggested that the presence of supernatural beings within human history at an early stage, a figure such as Melchizedek, may be the fact that lies beneath all the mythology of super-human figures that we find in the literature and religious ideas of ancient cultures. The stories of Greek and Roman gods and goddesses are a confused echo of a real supernatural presence in human life. By garbling, we get from Melchizedek to Zeus or Mercury.

However, I don't think anyone reading Genesis 14 would ever come away with the impression that Melchizedek was a supernatural figure. He was a royal priest, a servant of the Lord – a reminder, by the way, that God had other people in the world in that day besides Abraham. He is the proof that there were other priests of God than the Levitical

priests who, after all, came centuries after Melchizedek. What is more, his contact with Abraham afforded this author an argument regarding the relationship between Christ's priesthood and that of Aaron, an argument that may not mean a great deal to us today, but one that would have meant something to those to whom this sermon was written and sent.

In other words, this author is treating Melchizedek as a "type," an enacted prophecy of the Lord Jesus. "Typology," someone has said, "is God's fingerprint on history." He has woven into history people, and events, and institutions that prefigure and reveal the meaning of his kingdom and, especially, the unfolding of salvation in the life and work of the Messiah. The OT, as you know, is replete with types that served to prepare God's people's understanding of the coming Messiah. People, such as Melchizedek, Moses, and David; institutions such as prophecy, the priesthood, and royalty; events such as the exodus, the wilderness, and the conquest; ritual actions such as sacrifice or the Passover festival all embody in their own way the ultimate truths of salvation as it would unfold and the ministry of the Messiah once he had appeared in the world. If you stop and think about it, you will see how hard-pressed we would be to understand Jesus Christ and his work without all of this historical prefigurement, without the conceptual framework of Christ's atonement and his prophetic, priestly, and royal ministry having been woven into the fabric of the history of salvation. Well, Melchizedek is such a type, such a prefigurement. He represents to us another priesthood, not Levitical, and one that does not depend upon a certain ancestry, as did the Levitical priests who derived their authority from their descent from Aaron. Even his name and title prefigure Christ's eternal priesthood and kingship.

The fact that nothing is said about Melchizedek's father or ancestry is enough for the author of this sermon. Clearly his priesthood does not depend upon ancestry the way the Levitical priesthood did, and, in that, he foreshadows the priesthood of Jesus, who, as the author will point out in vv. 14-15, descended from Judah, not from Levi. The fact that Melchizedek is mentioned in connection with the Messiah – as in Psalm 110: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek" – is justification enough for treating Melchizedek as a foreshadowing of the coming Messiah. The fact that nothing is said of Melchizedek's ancestry or posterity serves to perfect the type, the enacted prophecy of someone who would be, according to Ps. 110, a priest *forever!*

- v.4 Another feature of the Melchizedek history that serves the purpose of this author is that Abraham, the patriarch, even at the moment of his military triumph, clearly treated Melchizedek as a superior. He paid him tithes and received a blessing from him.
- v.8 "declared to be living" looks back to v. 3 and the absence of any information in the record about Melchizedek's birth or death.
- v.10 In the Bible ancestors are often thought to contain within themselves all their descendants, at least representatively. But, lest this appeal to corporate personality be considered far-fetched, the author adds an "One might even say..." [Bruce, 12]

v.12 The law of Moses made no provision for another priesthood; it provided only for the Levitical priesthood and its regulations. But in Psalm 110 we read of a priest to come in the order of Melchizedek. This is obviously not the Levitical priesthood of the law.

In Hebrews, “law” refers not primarily to the various commandments that govern behavior, as it does in say, Galatians, but rather to the sum of sacrificial and ceremonial regulations that must be observed.

Now, this argument about Melchizedek and the Levitical priesthood may not seem to us as clear and cogent as we might expect from a biblical writer, but really, he is hitting these folk right where they live. The pivot of the argument is v. 11:

“If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood...why was there still need for another priest to come – one in the order of Melchizedek.”

Twice more in his demonstration of the necessity of Christ and his atonement (at 8:7 and 10:2) the author makes a similar argument. A conditional statement is used to make a point. In each case the argument amounts to a demonstration that the Bible itself reveals that the viewpoint of first century Judaism is fallacious, that Judaism’s view of salvation is contradicted by the biblical evidence itself.

Now several things should be noted. First, by its grammatical form this contrary-to-fact conditional statement suggests that the protasis, the if-clause is false. That is, perfection *could not* have been attained through the Levitical priesthood. That is important because it clearly suggests that that possibility was the very question at issue. That is, these folk to whom Hebrews was being sent were tempted to believe precisely that perfection *could* come from the Levitical priesthood. They were being tempted, as Jews, to return to the conviction that God’s provision for Israel in the Mosaic law and in the Levitical priesthood was adequate for salvation. The atonement of Jesus was not necessary. That is what first century Jews believed, by and large; that is the view these Jewish Christians had abandoned, and it is the view they were now being tempted to return to. But, that means that it is not the OT *per se* or the Mosaic administration that is being contradicted, but rather the prevailing religious ideas of the Judaism of that time, the ideas that Jesus and his apostles condemn as a corruption of the true faith of Israel. This is a very important point often missed. Believers in the OT knew that perfection couldn’t come by the operations of the Levitical priesthood. To believe that they could was to depart from the religion of Moses. But that is what Judaism had done. It is very much like a Protestant today arguing that perfection could not come from the action of the priest at the mass. However much that view may be in many minds associated with Christianity, it was never the teaching of God’s word, never the faith of God’s people.

And so, to these folk, enamored of a corrupt form of the true faith, this preacher makes an obvious point. If the Levitical priesthood was God’s definitive, final, sufficient provision for the salvation of his people, then what is all this about *another priesthood* and *another priest*. What is this in the Scripture about one coming who would be David’s lord and who, at the same time, would be a priest in the order of Melchizedek, that is, not a Levitical priest? In other words, he is reminding them of the biblical context for Christ’s priesthood which is not a Levitical

priesthood as everyone knows. The Bible provided for a priesthood such as Jesus Christ fulfilled. From Holy Scripture we expect a priest to come who would be superior to the Levitical priests – a royal priest, an eternal priest. And that priest was Jesus of Nazareth.

That is the simple force of his argument. The Scripture taught us to expect one like Jesus and to look for a priesthood higher than, superior to that of Aaron and the sons of Levi. If the Mosaic priesthood was all we needed, then why is the appearance of a priest in the order of Melchizedek prophesied in the ancient Scriptures.

Now, that may amount to very little to modern Gentile believers in the way of an argument for faith in Jesus Christ. But, remember: these readers are Jews, thoroughly acquainted with the OT, deeply convinced of the importance of the Mosaic law and its ceremonial regulations. Here is an argument from the Scriptures themselves being turned against them. Christ fits the profile of a non-Levitical priest and such a priest was prophesied in the Scripture. Clearly the Levitical priesthood was not the last word.

Now, what is important about this part of the argument – and what is confirmed in the verses that follow, that we will take up next Lord's Day evening – is that the issue being addressed in the sermon, or the letter, is precisely *how people are saved!*

The problem with the Levitical institutions was precisely that they couldn't *save* anybody. They couldn't make the worshipper perfect.

Now, to be sure, it could be said, "Well, they were never *intended* to save anyone." This author knows that, of course. He will lay it down as a law, later in his argument, that "the blood of bulls and goats *cannot take away sin.*" But he is dealing with the Levitical priesthood and ceremonies *under the Jewish view of them*, not in terms of their true purpose. And the Jews of the first century looked at the Mosaic arrangements *precisely as a complete way of salvation.* There was no place in their view for a Redeemer who would die for their sins. The sacrifices, in their view, did not point to something or someone else, they were salvation itself. With the law and the sacrifices, they had all they needed. It is in response to *that* viewpoint that this preacher argues as he does. And that is why you will not hear him talk about what good purposes the sacrifices served or how they fit into evangelical life and worship in the ancient epoch. (Remember, at the time Hebrews was written, Jewish Christians were still participating, and rightly so, in the sacrificial worship of the Jerusalem temple. He isn't against sacrificial worship *per se*; he is against a view of salvation that rests one's hope of peace with God on the performance of religious rites and ceremonies.) So this author deals with the priesthood and the sacrifices in respect to one thing and one thing only: can they take away sin, can these ceremonies, can these priests make you right with God. And the answer is "No!" And to prove it he begins to cut away the ground under that Jewish confidence in their externals, their outward acts, their religious performances.

And the first thing he does is to show them that the Scripture itself looks to another priesthood besides the Levitical. If the Levitical priesthood is all we need, what is this about another priest – who would also be David's lord – a priest in the order of Melchizedek. A king priest to come who wouldn't be of the priesthood of Aaron: the Scripture promises his coming. Obviously, the

Levitical priesthood is not the last word. But Christ fulfilled that promise of a greater priest. A loyal Jew, therefore, should be a believer in Jesus Christ.

Last Thursday I was interrupted in my office by the appearance of a young man who asked if he might speak to me. We sat down opposite one another and he began by telling me that he had a message to give me. He began to speak words that clearly were not of his own choosing, a form of word that he had been taught to say. The gist was that if I confessed the living and true God, as one, I would be saved; but, if I mentioned three, I would be cast into hellfire. He was, of course, a Muslim and was telling me to forsake Christianity or else. He told me that those I taught as a minister would perish also if I mixed the one God with others – by which he meant the Son and the Holy Spirit. He didn't offer arguments for this message, he simply repeated it. Whatever I said, he would repeat his "message." And, as often as I told him that I was a Christian, that I believed in the one, triune God, that I was trusting in Jesus Christ and his death and righteousness for my salvation and my peace with God, he would warn me that I was doomed. And I made the point to him that, for me, Islam could never satisfy, would never be adequate, because it made no adequate provision for *my salvation*. I had come to know God's love in the provision he made, at such terrible cost to himself, of the means by which my sins could be removed and I made perfect. Islam made no such provision. It left me to save myself and that I knew I could not do, could never do. I had learned that God was holy, as holy and as just and as righteous as any Muslim thinks he is. But I had also learned of God's love and what he had done to satisfy his justice in respect to my sins. I cannot find such a salvation in Islam, I told him. So much is this lacking in Islam, I told him, that Muslims can't even say that they will go to heaven when they die. The most they can say is that they *hope* they will. They have no certainty of God's love for them or of their own salvation.

I made no impression on him, alas, but he was a reminder to me that Hebrews has its finger on the real question: how is a man saved? First century Judaism cared about that question and thought that a man was saved by keeping the Mosaic law, by faithful attendance upon the Mosaic rituals, not so differently from the way a modern Muslim puts his hope in the observance of the five pillars. Other religions, in one way or another, are interested in how men become perfect and each has its own way to perfection. But it isn't enough. It isn't nearly enough. We need what we could never supply by any amount of our so imperfect obedience. We needed a high priest able to offer a perfect, an infinite sacrifice for our sins and offer it directly to God. Jesus was that priest and that sacrifice.

And we can never, must never forget that Jesus Christ first and foremost is our Savior from sin and death. The reason he is so important to us and to all humanity, the reason we should commit ourselves to him, trust in him, love and serve him, is primarily because he alone can make men and women, boys and girls, perfect. He gives us many other things, we may love him for many other reasons, but all of those pale compared to this: he can make us right with God and grant us entrance into eternal life and no one and nothing else can do that.

We worry about the intolerance of Islam; about the intolerance of secular humanism. But, we must never forget that the Bible is an intolerant book when it comes to views of salvation. It says that there is one name, one person, one work, one event and it lies behind us in the history of Jesus Christ. The difference between us and the Muslims is not that they believe there is but

one way and it is theirs. We believe that too. The difference is that we are right and they are wrong. Indeed we must give Islam credit. It cares about eternity. It thinks of the greatest issue of all human life, to be right with God. But its understanding of how that comes about is the tired, old way of all man-made religions. To be sure, there are other differences. We have far superior reasons for our faith. Islam is a confused amalgam of Christianity and Judaism, indeed, it is not too much to say that Islam is to Christianity much what Mormonism is to Christianity. I made a point of saying to the young man who came to see me that he gave his message resolutely, but that he did not persuade. And I said to him that I had far better reasons to believe the Bible in its presentation of Christ and salvation than I had to believe him or Islam. What is more, our way of bearing witness to the truth is the way of love not the way of force. Islam will always pale in comparison to Christianity for its want of a doctrine and an experience of God's grace. God is distant, remote in Islam. He is holy and to be feared in Christianity, but he is also to be loved and known as Father and Savior. And in this, Christianity reproduces in its doctrines what human beings know intuitively of God, having been made in his image. There is no God who gives himself for his people in Islam. Or in any other religion. But in Christianity, that self-giving lies at the bottom of everything, because the truth itself is found in the God of love and his Son, Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us.

And, if you think about it, the prophesy of a priest, an eternal priest, who would also be a king, a prophecy perfectly fulfilled in Jesus Christ, is the evidence, not all the evidence by any means, but an important piece of evidence that Jesus is the Savior and the only Savior of the world.